

Thersites

My quizzical friend Thersites has always been captivated by those TV games where people sit in what looks like a black electric chair in some distant university dining-room to be asked questions on their chosen subjects. This is because he is absolutely hopeless at such games and would be incapable of sitting in the same quiz-chair even once, let alone twice. Still, some of his friends in the Elysian fields are quite keen on this sort of thing – you know what a competitive lot the ancients were – and Thersites thought the brilliant readers of **Omnibus**, most of whom live on a diet of fish and are never happier than when answering abstruse questions about Dio Chrysostom or entering one of **Omnibus**'s fun packed competitions, would like to see how the gang usually makes out under the spotlight.

Enter Magnus Magnifilius:

M M : Hullo and welcome to the Gazza Refectory in the new Tower University, Blackpool (previously Monopoly Poly), where we will this evening find out who is to join the three other finalists in this year's *Magisterns*. They are, as you will remember from earlier rounds, Lesbia (whose special subject was sparrows), Ovid (an expert on how to change into a tree), and Pliny (volcanoes). To find out who will join them, please give a warm welcome to our first contestant. Your name and occupation, please?

Homer: Homer, and I'm chairman of various committees.

M M: And your special subject?

Homer: The *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

MM: Question number one, then, starting *now*: how many Homers were there?

Homer (does rapid calculations on fingers): One.

M M: Wrong. Four. Next: where do the gods live?

Homer: Heaven knows.

M M: Correct. Next: where were you born?

Homer: Seven cities claimed my birth, but in fact . . .

MM: Correct. Next: why did Achilles reject the embassy in Book 9 of the *Iliad*?

Homer: Umm, er, dash, I did know the answer to that once . . . (*thinks furiously*) Pass.

M M: Did you compose both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, or one of them, or neither?

Homer: Both.

M M: Wrong. Next: (*bleep bleep bleep*) – there's the buzzer, but I've started so I'll continue – could Homer write?

Homer (menacingly waving his white stick): You looking for trouble, sunshine? Of course I can write.

M M: Wrong, and at the end of that round you've scored two out of a possible five, passing on question number three, why Achilles rejected the embassy in *Iliad* 9. Viewers who would like an answer to this question should write in with a stamped, addressed cabin-trunk capable of carrying at least half a ton of closely typed A4. Thank you, Mr Homer, and don't trip over the other contestants, please, as you grope your way back to your seat.

Socratic ignorance

And now for our next contestant, from Athens, Greece: name and occupation?

Socrates: Socrates, unemployed.

M M: And your special subject?

Socrates: Wisdom.

M M: 'Wisdom', then, starting *now*: what is goodness?

Socrates: I'm sorry, I don't understand. I usually ask the questions, and you have to answer them, and then I show you up for the most frightful cretin.

M M: Sorry, Socrates, rules are rules.

Socrates: But what do you mean, 'rule'? For you are not ruling, then, as it seems to me, on the one hand.

M M: Look, Socrates, we play this game *my* way or not at all.

Socrates: Oh all right, then. Would you repeat the question?

M M: What is goodness?

Socrates: (thinks for four hours) Pass.

(Bleep bleep bleep)

M M: I'm sorry but I'll have to stop you there. At the end of that round your score is nought. Any of the following answers would have sufficed: excellence, virtue, merit, quality, value, worth, or superiority.

Socrates (brightens up): Really? Well, thank-you very much indeed. This is absolutely splendid news, you know. But who told you? I've been searching for the answer for the whole of my life! And now I've found it! Hurrah! I say, could you write it down? I don't want to forget it. Now I've got something actually to *teach* all those ghastly young men who come to me for instruction, I'll be able to charge them and make a decent living like any ordinary self-respecting sophist. You feel such a wally not knowing the answer to anything, I can tell you!

M M: Glad to be of service. Any time.

Wonder-boy from Stagira

And now, please, welcome our next contestant, from Stagira in Thrace. Name and occupation, please?

Aristotle: Aristotle, and I'm a genius.

M M: And your special subject?

Aristotle: Well, anything, I suppose.

M M: Right, then, here is the first question on anything, starting *now*: are the soul and the body one?

Aristotle: Yes.

M M: Correct. Next: what is change?

Aristotle: Change is the actuality of the potential *qua* such.

M M: Correct. Next: how many stomachs does a cow have?

Aristotle: Four.

M M: Correct. Next: what is happiness?

Aristotle: An activity of the soul in accordance with excellence.

M M: Correct. Next: how many sorts of statement are there?

Aristotle: Two, simple and compound.

M M: Correct. Next: what is tragedy?

Aristotle: An imitation of an action which is serious and complete and has a certain magnitude.

M M: Correct. Next: how does an octopus copulate?

Aristotle: With a bifurcated tentacle.

M M: Correct. Next: who will win the Cup next year? (*Bleep bleep bleep*) Yes, you may answer the question.

Aristotle: Well, you know, I've always been a great fan of Cloughies and though he's had to sell Des Walker to Sampdoria he's a good judge of young talent and I wouldn't be at all surprised if he hadn't got someone lined up already no I think it could well be Cloughie's year though there again you can never discount Liverpool and I fancy some of the smaller clubs too I mean see what Sunderland did last year amazing then there's the sleeping giant of the northeast Newcastle Keegan could work a miracle there this time round it's a funny old game so you never know, do you, Brian, eh?

M M: Correct, and you, Aristotle, at the end of that round, have eight out of eight – full marks on, well, anything!

A lame performance

And our final contestant comes from Corinth, Greece, or at least seems to have done, though he is now resident in Thebes, and there is a strong rumour that he even killed his father and married his mother. Name and occupation, please?

Oedipus: Oedipus, and I'm a tyrant.

M M: And your special subject?

Oedipus: Myself.

M M: Question one, then, starting *now*: who are you?

Oedipus: Who am I? What do you mean, who am I? (*Voice rises to a scream*) Doomed from birth to a dreadful end, plougher of the furrow whence I myself sprang, father and brother, mother and sister, uncle and aunt (*plunges knitting needles into eyes*), would that Cithaeron had never seen such a

M M (consulting card): Well, all right, I'll be generous and give you that.

Next: . . .